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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

James W. Silver

October 15, 1949
Aberdeen, Scotland

Last week Aneurin Bevan, British Minister of Health, reviewed developments of the first year under the National Health Service. Mr. Bevan happens to be the Labor's most persuasive speaker and, as expected, launched into great praise for his party's controversial experiment.

Since his press conference I have made a special effort to talk with people connected with the medical profession - doctors, nurses, dentists, students, and public health officials -- and during the coming week I have almost every evening filled with further appointments. Then I shall report to you what a considerable number of medicos have to say about Mr. Bevan and his system.

The Minister of Health admits that state control has cost about twice what his party had anticipated (in 1944). This is true, he says, because of the overwhelming need that has been disclosed. In the past there has been a vast amount of silent suffering and preventable pain, now become articulate. Mr. Bevan argues, too, that the cost of medical attention would have risen in any case and that it represents not new spending but a redistribution of expenditure.

In the first year of the National Health Service, 41,200,200 (over 95%) of the British people registered under the plan. Some 19,000 doctors out of 21,000 are in the service. Three percent of the total cost of something under \$1,200,000,000 went for administration.

At an average cost of fifty-eight cents, 187,000,000 prescriptions were dispensed. In these first twelve months 9400 dentists treated 8,500,000 patients. More than 5,000,000 spectacles (30% of the beneficiaries have two pairs) have been supplied and three million are on order; production of lenses will equal demand by the end of the year. Among the 200,000 medical appliances supplied were 5000 wigs, 20,000 deaf aids, 8400 artificial limbs, 7200 glass eyes, and 21,000 surgical boots.

According to Mr. Bevan, abuse of the system has been "astonishingly small," but a few practitioners have been disciplined. The Minister of Health points out that abuse comes from collusion on the part of both doctor and patient. Over-prescription has been a main fault and

comes in some degree because the doctor tries to forestall a second visit of the patient. Doctors and dentists have been overworked and there have been other problems. It would take years for the system to settle.

Mr. Bevan thinks that free service to overseas visitors will be continued but that no one will be allowed to enter Britain for the sole purpose of obtaining medical aid. Such treatment, he adds, should be part of the normal hospitality offered to a visitor - though Britain has no intention of adopting the slogan: "Come to Britain and have an accident." Americans and Canadians have taken most advantage of the free service to aliens. The government hopes to arrange for reciprocal agreements with other countries.

Mr. Bevan further states that the Labor Party is "dead set against" any payment by the patient when treated. He admits, though, that an increase in personal contribution may become necessary: - "The possibilities of taxation are infinite." (Today a man pays \$1.82 and a woman \$1.42 per week - approximately half comes from the employer - for all types of insurance. Of this amount about eighteen cents is allotted to the health program. Seven-eighths of the total cost of the health scheme comes from general taxation. All figures are pre-devaluation.)

After a bit more of investigation, I shall tell you whether the members of the medical profession I have been able to contact agree with the optimism of Mr. Bevan regarding Britain's medical present and future.
